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Capitalising on urban cultural resources for creative city development: A conceptual review and the way forward for Malaysia's George Town

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Abstract

The renewed interest and attention given to cities or urban areas as the catalyst of growth and economic development have garnered importance both in developed and developing countries alike. In advocating sustainable urban development, there is now emphasis on embedding the element of culture in the process of urban planning to spur economic development. As economic globalization triggers and heightens competition amongst cities, many cities in the world are strategizing to leverage on their cities' cultural assets and resources. Cities are now embracing notions of creativity and innovation into the strategic planning of place, culture and the economy, thus, the birth of the creative city aspiration. This conceptual paper aims to discuss the applicability of the creative city concept for Penang, Malaysia by examining the extent to which cultural capital can be utilized as resources in creative city development, in particular, the challenges and prospects that George Town faces in the quest of a transformation to a full-fledged creative city. It was found that the way forward for this is an orchestrated effort in which government agencies work in collaboration with community leaders, business community, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and other stakeholders to make proposals and recommendations for the earnest transformation of Georgetown into a creative cultural (heritage) city . Development plans should incorporate regenerative cultural projects that cater to community needs with provisions for longitudinal studies to monitor and evaluate the social, economic and environmental impacts of the city's cultural projects.

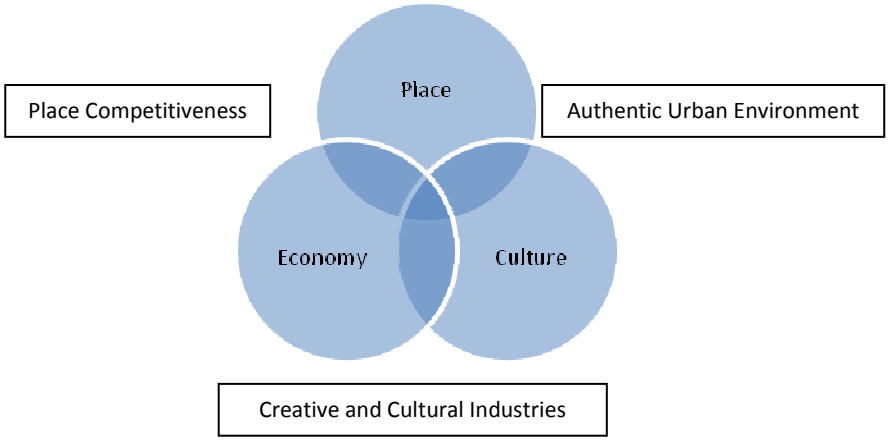
Keywords: creative city, cultural capital, cultural resources, George Town, UNESCO World Heritage, urban planning

Introduction

In recent times, the renewed interest in cities or urban areas as the engine of economic growth has been central to urban policy discourse. Simultaneously, there is an emphasis on embedding the element of culture in the urban planning process to revive and spur economic development. As cities worldwide compete robustly in today's globalised economy, many cities are repositioning and restrategizing themselves to exploit and capitalise on the inherent cultural assets of their cities for value-added comparative advantage and competitive edge (AuthentiCity, 2008: 22). Today, more cities in Europe, North America and Asia are embracing the notions of creativity, innovation and generating wealth through strategic planning and integration of the key domains of place, culture and the economy, thus giving rise to the creative city visions and culture-led urban regeneration as a new paradigm shift in urban planning (AuthentiCity, 2008: 21) (see Figure 1). An expansion of newly developed creative industrial clusters in city quarters and regional creative hubs in former declining cities and industrial districts, especially of the Western context has broad policy implications in the economic, sectoral and spatial front

(Evans, 2009). It is interesting to ascertain whether this phenomenon is adoptable and applicable in rapidly developing cities of Malaysia. Against this background, this conceptual paper discusses how urban cultural resources can be capitalised and utilised as a strategy for creative city development especially in George Town, Malaysia. This paper explores the challenges and prospects that a city faces when adopting and promoting creative and cultural industries as a key growth sector in the urban areas.

Specifically, this paper is organised into five sections. Following an introduction in section one, section two reviews the literature on the emergence of creative cities and strategizing urban cultural heritage resources. Section three illustrates the case of George Town, Penang as a creative city with deliberations on the strengths, opportunities and threats. Section four discusses the way forward for creative cities; and finally, section five concludes with theoretical and practical implications for creative city development within the Malaysian context.



Source: Evans (n.d.), www.ceut.udl.cat/wp-content/uploads/Evans.pdf

Figure 1. *Creative city visions: Balancing between place, culture and economy*

Literature review

The emergence of creative cities

Charles Landry (2000) defines creative cities as places and spaces that provide opportunities and interactions amongst urban citizenry to resolve their own problems and enhance their quality of lives. A creative city regards human capital and creativity, not the city infrastructure or architecture, as the core factor contributing to vibrant, lively and sustainable cities (Varbanova, 2007). Contemporary cities aim to cultivate creative arts and culture promotion and innovation amongst their citizens for economic regeneration (Sasaki, 2004). As information and communication technology (ICT) advancement shifts mankind into the New Economy of innovative economic base, it is imperative to re-evaluate the city's creative arts and cultural resources, talents, strengths and potentials to address and cope with the dynamic changes in all realms (Landry, 2005: 4).

According to Landry (2000) a creative city requires not only physical and hard infrastructures (i.e. buildings, roads, utilities) but also 'soft infrastructure' (i.e. mental infrastructure) in the way a city handles and manages opportunities and challenges. The evolving dynamisms in a city inadvertently results in new threats and challenges that require creative solutions enabled by deliberations by stakeholders and grassroots. Whilst theorists like Florida (2002, 2008) assert that places, notably urban places are hubs that attract innovative and creative people to cluster to spur innovation for local economic

development. This theoretical underpinning is purported by Jane Jacobs (1972) that the diversity of a city in terms of culture, people and resources sets forth the preconditions for economic growth.

Creative cities are home to the creative industries, which refer to "those industries that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (DCMS, 2010: 9). The creative industry classifications include advertising, arts, craft, design, designer fashion, film, fine arts and antiques, games software, music, performing arts, publication, software, radio and television. Creative cities house the creative class of high-tech researchers, artists, creators and ordinary citizens who are involved in free creative human activity (popularly known as work or labour) to produces valuable culture-based products and inventions (Landry, 2000). Mumford (1961) asserts the importance to reconstitute cities to satisfy human consumption and creativity.

In advanced economies like the United Kingdom and Western Europe, development policies have emphasised on the role of creative industries and creative cities as the ultimate urban regeneration strategy for a post-industrial economy and society (Landry, 2000; Florida, 2002 & 2008). Cities endowed in cultural resources are leveraging on their creative and cultural industries to regenerate local development and growth. Since the late 1980s and 1990s, the sectors of creative industries located within city limits and the surrounding are earmarked as the drivers of growth towards planning and transforming creative cities (Gligorijevic, 2007: 21). Nonetheless, the notion of creative city is diverse with many conceptions as stated in the works of seminal authors like Landry, Florida and Jacobs.

In retrospect, the discourse on creativity and the Creative City Movement can be traced back to the late 1980s with notable expressions such as culture, arts, cultural planning, cultural resources and cultural industries (Landry, 2005; KEA European Affairs, 2009). The creativity notion emerged later by mid-1990s. In 1992, part of Australia's cultural policy aimed to transform the country into a 'Creative Nation'; and in the United Kingdom Ken Robinson's blueprint *All Our Future: Creativity, Culture and Education* (NACCCE, 1999) placed creativity as part of the political agenda. Subsequently, cultural industries are known as creative industries and creative economy (Landry, 2005), whilst the term 'creative class' was coined through the works of Richard Florida in 2002. Nonetheless, the debate continues on the significant contribution of creative industries for economic development, and on the sustainability of culture-led urban regeneration strategies (Jayne, 2004; Evans, 2009).

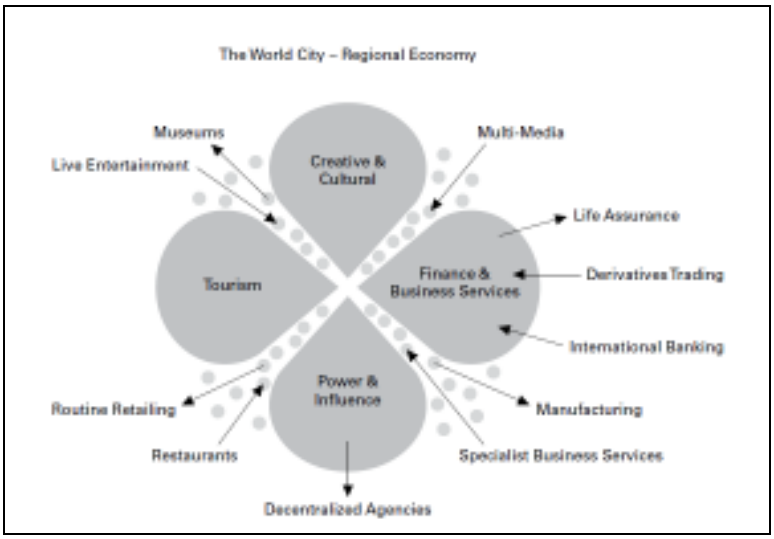
Urban cultural planning and resources

Planning for sustainable urban development now emphasises on embedding the element of culture in the planning process, besides considering other physical, economic, technological and public policy domains (Smidt-Jensen, 2007; Steward & Kruska, 2008: 3). Literature puts forward the idea of cultural planning and strategic utilisation of cultural resources to develop urban areas and community development (Landry, 2005). According to Landry (2005: 7): "*cultural resources are embodied in peoples' creativity, skills and talents. They are not only 'things' like buildings, but also symbols, activities and the repertoire of local products in crafts, manufacturing and services....Urban cultural resources include the historical, industrial and artistic heritage representing assets including architecture, urban landscapes or landmarks. Local and indigenous traditions of public life, festivals, rituals or stories as well as hobbies and enthusiasms. Resources like language, food and cooking, leisure activities, clothing and sub-cultures or intellectual traditions that exist everywhere are often neglected, but can be used to express the specialness of a location*."

With abundant and unique cultural resources endowed within our city limits, the contention now is to synergise these cultural resources and citizen creativity to foster an innovative economic base (Sasaki, 2008). Urban planners and all stakeholders are urged to utilise and exploit their respective urban cultural resources in a creative way to further enhance and develop the urban milieu (Landry, 2005: 8). Whilst many cities in advanced economies (i.e. Liverpool, Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham in the UK) were undergoing a period of industrial decline, the emergence of creative economy flagship underpinned by cultural resources was considered most viable and timely to regenerate and revitalise urban areas, thus

purporting and promoting the way arts and cultural resources can be integrated into the overall planning and urban development process.

More recent examples include Toronto in Canada which moved towards culture-led regeneration based on a multi-dimensional approach. In 2003, the City of Toronto officially adopted the Culture Plan for the Creative City. The ten-year action plan aimed to capitalise on Toronto's arts, culture and heritage assets to strategically position the city as a global cultural capital. Subsequently, an initiative entitled *Vision 2011: Thinking Big About Culture-led Regeneration* will further re-use, renew and rejuvenate the city of which art, culture and/or creativity assumes a key and transformative role (AuthentiCity, 2008: 41, 43-44). In fact, culture is earmarked as one of four fundamentals towards shaping Toronto's success as a world city and regional economy (see Figure 2).



Source: AuthentiCity (2008) p. 32

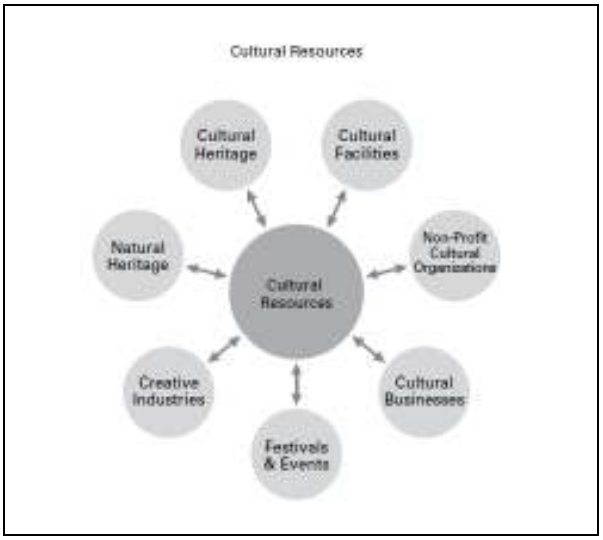
Figure 2. *Toronto's agenda for prosperity to become a world city – Regional economy*

Specifically, cultural planning pioneered during the early 1990s is a place-based approach to local and regional cultural development. According to David et al. (1995) (cited in AuthentiCity, 2008: 29), cultural planning is defined as "the strategic and integrated planning and use of cultural resource in urban and community development". Hence, cultural planning embodies the cultural resources in urban areas with an emphasis on cultural mapping (Mommaas, 2004). Applying this approach, the city of Toronto in Canada embarked on a systematic cultural mapping exercise to locate and map creative and cultural resources within the city. Examples of cultural resources for cultural mapping include festivals and events, cultural businesses, non-profit cultural organisations, cultural facilities, cultural heritage, natural heritage and creative industries (see Figure 3). This strategy validates the recommendation by renowned urban theorist Patrick Geddes that urged urban planners to "map before you plan" and not otherwise (AuthentiCity, 2008: 30). Without doubt, cultural mapping is the way forward to document and capture the cultural resources of an urban area.

Concerns on local culture preservation

Whilst burgeoning literature in creative cities has expounded the need to capitalise on the cultural resources of a city as the primary aim of their culture-led regeneration strategies (Evans, 2009), but on the other hand, there is an emerging debate on the extent to which local culture is being preserved at the expense of reconstructing the urban space based on market forces (Gligorijevic, 2007: 36). This issue is exacerbated by the pervasive forces of globalisation as the world embraces the New Economy. Since the

20th century, advancement in technological innovations and liberalisation of economies has to some extent homogenized cultures across the globe and made them less distinct (Steward & Kuska, 2008: 5). As a result, the original cultural elements and resources are at stake and risk being compromised. In the realms of built environment, raising concerns pertain to how architectural manifestations are now similar and "westernised" to the extent of being insensitive and less respectful of local and historical cultures (Steward & Kuska, 2005: 5). Indeed, scholars have argued that the adoption and promotion of creative industries as a catalyst of development has to be ingrained in local culture instead of 'westernised, imported cultural products and value systems' (Evans, nd: 43).



Source: AuthentiCity (2008) p. 29

Figure 3. *Examples of cultural resources for cultural mapping*

Cities in transitional economies such as Belgrade (the capital of Serbia) encountered a scarcity of strategies for urban rehabilitation based on local cultural, intellectual and personal resources (Gligorijevic, 2007: 36). Likewise, some shortcomings are experienced by newly industrialised economies like Singapore in its quest to embrace the creative city branding. In the case of Singapore, Landry (2005) (cited in Hall, nd: 7) highlighted that the concept of a creative city suggests a condition of 'diversity and openness' and this inevitably poses a threat to Singapore's traditions. Obviously, this situation has restrained and constrained Singapore's creativity in transforming to become a full-fledged creative city.

Gentrification and its impact on creating sustainable creative cities

A growing emphasis on culture-led urban regeneration in contemporary cities leads us to another critical issue on the impact of gentrification on sustainable creative spaces, especially on heritage quarters. As urban areas and inner cities succumb to the vagaries of socio-economic transformation, urban policy agendas are directed towards revitalising and regenerating these areas, thus, the onset of urban regeneration or the gentrification process. Urban regeneration or the 'renaissance of cities' refers to reinvestment in urban spaces that are derelict due to abandonment and neglect, which involves "comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economy, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change" (Roberts, 2000:17)

Although gentrification provides benefits with the re-introduction of economic activities to the built environment and natural setting manifested through increasing land values and hiking rentals; oftentimes the plight of how lower income users of urban spaces are displaced or socially excluded are rarely revealed (Shaw & Porter, 2011: 1). In this regard, though the nascent role of culture and creative

industry-based urban regeneration is widely acknowledged through high property values and rents, promoting cultural consumption and urban living (Montgomery, 2005); but this scenario has inadvertently created a social divide amongst urban dwellers (Peck, 2005: 746). Ironically, gentrification is like a double-edged sword that has many accolades and drawn equally much criticism. Evidences revealed that the new service economy produce new social segregations whereby lowly skilled service workers supply the labour for non-creative jobs that service employees in the creative sector (Evan, nd: 52). Critics of creative city theory call for creative solutions to resolve problems of social inclusion and socially disadvantaged groups in urban areas (Landry, 2000).

Despite these criticisms, there are plausible models of culture's contribution to urban regeneration, which impact positively on the physical environment, the economy and society in the UK (Evans & Shaw, 2004). Innovative public art benefit the physical milieu by utilising abandoned buildings and public space for artists' creativity, employment, and future cultural hotspots. In turn, culture fuels the economy through increased investment and tourism trends, property market, diversified talents, job/wealth creation and partnerships in the local cultural sector. By the same token, culture improves community perception, participation, social capital and partnerships for cultural regeneration. Nonetheless, efforts should be made to quantify the intangible social impact.

Case study: George Town, Penang

This section illustrates the case study of George Town, Penang en route to become a creative city. Although the potential of the 'creative industry, creative city' development agenda seems to be promising and appealing, many Asian scholars have realised that the application of these concepts in a non-Western context is fraught with confusion and tensions (O'Connor & Kong, 2009: 1). Most Western economies resorted to the 'creative cities' concept as a post-industrial strategy. However, the contextual conditions and development trajectories differ for the transitional and developing economies. One may possibly query: "What is George Town, Penang's approach to the development of creative industries? Is there (even) a creative city policy priority?"

Unlike the situation in Western economies, Penang's development trajectory is largely inclined towards industrialisation (Chan, 2010: 14) implying that the city-state has not reached a post-industrial scenario. Nonetheless, urban developmental agendas are underway to plan Penang to be a creative city (Kharas, Zeufack & Majeed, 2010). Arguably, local scholars verify the notion that a city's heritage can be translated into a creative city policy (Khoo & Badarulzaman, 2011). As purported by Evans (nd: 43) heritage quarters play a central role towards preservation of identity and reconstruction of national/ethnic cultures for cultural tourism. In line with this, George Town's (the capital of Penang) inscription into the UNESCO World Heritage List on 7 July 2008 augurs well for the adoption of this creative city strategy to run concurrently with strategies to preserve and conserve the city's cultural resources for sustainability. Capitalising on Penang's culture is highlighted by local Penang scholars (Ooi, 2011) by urging people to think of "Penang as a Culture Capital, and by thinking of Culture as Capital."

In addition, George Town's unique cultural capital is a core asset that fulfills Criterion (iii) of the UNESCO's Outstanding Universal Value. Hence, George Town prides itself as a "living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, and European colonial influences. This multi-cultural tangible and intangible heritage is expressed in the great variety of religious buildings of different faiths, ethnic quarters, the many languages, worship and religious festivals, dances, costumes, art and music, food, and daily life" (Malaysia, 2011: SAP 4-1). Acknowledging the importance of culture has led to many new avenues amongst local stakeholders to map, document and archive the city's cultural capital for posterity. For instance, the Living Museum project under the auspices of George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) is an outreach platform between inner city dwellers and user/visitors of George Town's World Heritage Site (WHS) (Ang, 2012: 10). To ensure that George Town's intangible cultural resources gain due recognition, the Living Museum aims to reveal and display the local history, traditions, culture, crafts and arts to the general public.

Nonetheless, local inner city dwellers are not exempted from the vagaries and downside of urban regeneration and gentrification. Though the UNESCO inscription in 2008 has uplifted George Town positioning, the inner city is overcome by constant challenges and threats. As lamented by a local researcher (Ang, 2012: 9), "*The revitalisation and remodelling of heritage buildings into boutique hotels and backpacker homes have redefined how the city uses space, and a fair share of residents, traders and craftsmen now face displacement and dislocation. Commercialisation threatens to compromise the city's authenticity*."

To counter this issue, heritage stakeholders in George Town have collaborated to promote community engagement in heritage conservation. A case in point is the on-going community engagement project that involves the tenants of a community temple 'Hock Teik Cheng Sin' in George Town, Penang. As a noble effort to address the needs of inner city tenants as well as to advocate for more affordable housing, Think City (under Khazanah Malaysia) together with several non-governmental organisations have spearheaded the people participatory process that entails the engagement of both owners and tenants to retain and keep George Town's urban cultural heritage alive. By the same token, the Little India Joint Action Committee (LIJAC) has played a major role in facilitating and empowering the traders, residents and local community of Little India in preparing an urban regeneration Special Action Plan for Little India in the heart of George Town WHS (Ahmad et al, 2013). Indeed there are various strategies and programs to pave the way forward for creative cities as deliberated in the subsequent section.

The creative city: The way forward

Our cultural heritage is the culmination of human creativity and innovation over many centuries, and the results of such creativity and innovation keep the society moving forward (Landry, 2000). Hence, creative and cultural industries become the engine of growth in the new economy. Today, economic development and planning is much focused on the producers and consumers of the creative economy as a foundation to establish a vibrant and dynamic creative city. Nonetheless, a creative city requires a holistic and creative approach in governance and planning that go beyond the conventional planning strategies and measures to integrate art, culture, urban design and the economy towards fostering a creative and innovative environment (Simeti, 2006). According to Sasaki (2008) synergising the artistic, cultural and technological talent and creativity in the society would have a profound impact on other key areas including education, employment, industry, social system, medical care and environment in the long term.

Experiences in Japanese cities such as Kanazawa, Kyoto, Yokohama and Osaka showed that the movement for the creative city began from the grass-roots with support from the local business leaders, local artisans and the local community (Sasaki, 2008). The cities nurtured and cultivated their creative milieu by fusing contemporary art with indigenous traditional crafts and performing arts to preserve the unique cultural landscape. The refurbished gallery and studio space in turn attracted young artists to congregate and produce creative work and energy. The 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa for instance attracted more than 1.5 million visitors each year with significant economic effects (Sasaki, 2008).

Successful creative city stories in London, UK are exemplified in the cases of Peckham, Swiss Cottage, King's Cross Opportunity Area, Greenwich Peninsula, Barking Town Centre and Deptford (Arts Council England, 2009). The case studies provide good practice of how the creative industries, heritage, cultural and sporting events are integral factors that shaping places. These case studies showed positive impacts on the local economy as a result of community cohesion, participation, local skills utilisation, long term cultural vision, reshaping existing provision and local ownership. By providing studios space for creative businesses and local articans, key economic impacts were notable including re-utilisation of abandoned public and industrial buildings, provision of workspace and home for artists, employment, higher property and area values, creative clustering, education and training links, and better housing and amenities.

An orchestrated effort is vital to promote the creative city policy amongst the citizens. Government agencies should work in collaboration with community leaders, business community, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and other stakeholders to make proposals and recommendations to pursue the adoption of creative city in their respective cities. Development plans should incorporate regenerative cultural projects that cater to community needs. Longitudinal impact studies are essential to allow an evaluation of cultural projects with related social, economic and environmental impact.

Conclusions and implications

The development of creative city is a challenge to many cities. It is noteworthy that the financial and physical capacity to deliver cultural infrastructure is limited. However, there are many success stories about the development of creative cities around the world that capitalise on indigenous creative cultural assets. It is notable that successful creative cities arise out of partnerships between private development and public agencies, with linkages to the local community. The positive outcomes of cultural regeneration and the role played by heritage, creative industries and sporting events are integral to promoting cultural infrastructure and the development of a creative city as aspired by the city of George Town.

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